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SELF-TRANSFORMATION AND SPIRITUAL EXEMPLARS

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the process of self-transformation through which a person comes to embody the ideal of her religion's vision of the divine, as far as that ideal is expressible in a human life. The paper is concerned with the self as the subject of religious commitments, traits, religious aspirations and religiously inspired ideals. The self-transformative journey that people are invited to undertake poses a number of philosophical and practical difficulties; the paper explores some of these difficulties, concentrating on those that arise in connection with the notion of potential future selves. This paper suggests that imaginative reflection upon exemplary individuals provides one way through these difficulties, for these individuals can show us what it looks like when someone achieves, or draws close to, the ideal.

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I. DISCERNMENT AND BECOMING

Living one's life as a religious person would seem to require confidence in the possibility of being able to distinguish between good and evil as well as in the possibility of choosing the good. The distinction between good and evil is often thought of in terms of morality, our behaviour toward others. Morality can be roughly characterized by appealing to the rules that each religion offers in an attempt to outline the obligations and restrictions that should guide human behaviour towards others. To the extent that discernment of good and evil is needed, on this account its role is limited to helping a person to judge how an accepted moral code applies in any given context. The moral conception of good and evil, however, is not the concern of this paper. Rather, it is concerned with the discernment of good and evil in relation to the question of what sort of self a person who is following a religious path is in the process of becoming. In the context of this paper, good can be understood as that which is conducive to a person becoming a fuller expression of the divine as a human being, and evil can be understood as that which moves a person further away from embodying that expression. On this account, then, the discernment of good and evil concerns a person's self-perception in relation to the divine.

This paper addresses the topic of the discernment of good and evil through examining certain dimensions of, what we have chosen to call, the "religious self." The religious self is a self which is focused on her own transformation in order to become a perfected version of herself, one which maximally embodies the ideal of her religion's vision of the divine insofar as it is expressible in earthly life, that is to say a maximally good self. The path of self-transformation poses a number of philosophical and practical difficulties, some rooted in problems created by self-reflection and some rooted in problems associated with knowledge of our potential future selves. This paper argues that the use of religious exemplars provides one way of navigating through these difficulties.

II. THE SELF SIMPLICITER

While a great many different academic perspectives on the self are available, what has been termed, a "folk-conception" or "common-sense view" of the self is still widely used. By relying on this folk-conception, most people are able to talk about the self and to be understood by others without much apparent

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difficulty. According to one understanding of this folk-conception, talk about the self typically refers to "*the set of a person's core commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals*: the characteristics that are most central to him or her."[1] While this may strike some as an overly intellectualized understanding due to its emphasis on inescapably cognitive aspects of selves, such as commitments, aspirations and ideals, it nonetheless seems to capture the heart of what matters to many of us when we think about ourselves.[2] It also has the advantage of implicitly acknowledging the emotional basis of selfhood, for commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals are obviously emotionally-laden. In this paper, therefore, we use this intuitively plausible way of talking about the self to allow us to discuss the subject which undergoes self-transformation.

III. THE RELIGIOUS SELF

Taking the self to be "*the set of a person's core commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals*: the characteristics that are most central to him or her," can provide an entry point for different types of investigation of the self.[3] One might, as Kristján Kristjánsson does, approach the self from the detached standpoint of a moral philosopher or moral psychologist. One might thus investigate, what Kristjánsson calls, the "moral self," that is "the self as the subject of moral agency and the object of moral evaluation."[4] We do not pursue this trajectory in this paper, although our approach is similar. It seems that, just as one might be aware of oneself as a moral self—a self that is the subject of moral agency and the object of moral evaluation—one may also be aware of oneself as a "religious self." The religious self can be understood as the self insofar as it is the subject of religious commitments, traits (dispositions to engage in certain kinds of religious behaviours), religious aspirations and religiously inspired ideals. Kristjánsson observes that "some individuals decide, while others do not, to let moral concerns represent a fulfilment of something central to them: their mainstay or balance in life."[5] He regards such individuals as having cultivated moral selves. Paralleling Kristjánsson, we might then say that those individuals who have cultivated religious selves have let religious concerns represent the fulfilment of something central to them.

This notion of the religious self provides a useful heuristic device to investigate the transformative journey that many religious people undertake, as do some whose lives lack an explicitly religious orientation. Religious selves are, perhaps quintessentially, self-consciously seeking to undergo self-transformation as they move from their current state of self to one closer to whatever they take their ideal self to be.[6]

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IV. ON THE POSSIBILITY OF TRANSFORMATION

To believe that self-transformation is possible, one must also believe that the self can change. Yet some have wondered if the self can in fact change. Perhaps, as some philosophers have held, it is the self's immutability that makes it the same self over time. It is part of the folk-conception of the self, however, that a person's core commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals can change, sometimes to the extent that we can say of someone, "she is no longer herself."[7] The locution "she is no longer herself" alerts us that many

1 Kristján Kristjánsson, *The Self and Its Emotions* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 5. How the terms "personality" and "character" relate to this folk-conception of the self is not discussed here, although Kristjánsson does address these issues.

2 We leave it open whether or not there is, what we might call, a metaphysical self in addition to the self identified by the folk-conception.

3 Kristjánsson, *The Self and Its Emotions*, 5.

4 Ibid., 5.

5 Ibid., 90.

6 The term "self-transformation" is ambiguous. Here, we use it primarily to mean "transformation of self" and secondarily to mean "transformation brought about by oneself."

7 We do not discuss here issues concerning numerical identity or enter into the debate about the possibility of multiple selves being associated with a single physical body. On the former issue, see L. Gunnarsson, "What is constituted in self-constitution?", in *Personen*: *Ein interdiziplinärer Dialog*, ed. J. Quitterer, C. Kanzian and E. Runggaldier (Austrian Wittgenstein Society, 2002). On the latter issue, see Rhett Gayle, *Multiplying Multiplicity* (2005).

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people can and do think of the self as mutable. Most people would be likely to agree that the self is not fully formed at birth and that it does not remain unchanged during the journey from birth to death. Human children are not born with a pre-given package of core commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals. These must, then, be acquired along the way of a person's life. Some amount of change takes place in all normally functioning humans. Moreover, we are surely all familiar with stories of individuals who, for one reason or another, have changed quite dramatically over the course of their life.

Despite the range of accounts of the self to be found within both Asian and Western religious traditions, the conviction that the self can undergo profound transformation is presupposed in virtually all of them.[8] Of course, this shared conviction is played out in very different ways within each religious tradition. Consider, for instance, a Christian's aspiration to become Christ-like and a Mahāyāna Buddhist's aspiration to become a bodhisattva. Although these aspirations are clearly very different in quite specific respects, each presupposes and depends upon the idea that the religious self is capable of undergoing deep transformation.

Religions not only teach that profound self-transformation is possible, they also positively require their adherents to pursue it. Religious selves are presented with a, typically non-optional, goal to aspire towards (to become Christ-like, to become enlightened and so on), along with various spiritual practices that can be understood as methods to assist them in the attainment of that goal.[9] By adopting a religious goal and undertaking to follow the directions provided to reach it, a religious self becomes committed to undertaking a journey of self-transformation. She makes a conscious and deliberate choice to strive to bring about whatever core changes to herself are required for her to arrive at her goal.

V. THE TRANSFORMING SELF AND THE SELF-CONCEPT

A potentially confusing ambiguity in our thinking about the self is generated if we fail to distinguish between the notion of the "self" and the notion of the "self-concept."[10] Applying this distinction to the common-sense view of the self that was introduced above, we can regard the self as "*the set of a person's core commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals*: the characteristics that are most central to him or her" and we can regard the self-concept as "*the set of a person's self-conceptions or beliefs about his or her self*."[11] The self-concept, in other words, contains a person's idea of herself. The usual presumption is that everyone has a self that is represented to each person subjectively as a self-concept. However, some argue that the two notions collapse into one because the self is entirely a cognitive construction that can amount to nothing more than the self-concept does.[12] This view lies behind the popular adage: "You are what you think you are."

If we are what we think we are, then self-transformation would simply require a sufficiently dramatic change in what we believe ourselves to be.[13] A person may not now regard herself as particularly courageous, but if she can just convince herself that she is courageous, then she will be so, for there is nothing to her self over and above what she believes it to be. It makes no sense for one holding this view to ask herself whether or not she is mistaken if she believes herself to be courageous. Intuitively, though, it does seem to make sense for her to ask herself this question. Moreover, surely we could imagine someone saying of herself that she thought she was courageous until the moment when her courage failed and she allowed something terrible

8 John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Yale Univ. Press, 2005).

9 For some examples of goal directed spiritual practices, see Huai-chin Nan and William Bodri, *Spiritual Paths and their Meditation Techniques* (Top Shape Publishing, 2010).

10 For a good discussion of the distinction between self and self-concept, see Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1991). Also, see David A. Jopling, *Self-Knowledge and the Self* (Routledge, 2000).

11 Kristjánsson, *The Self and Its Emotions*, 5.

12 See, for example, K. J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (Basic Books, 1991). For another example of someone holding this view, see N. Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

13 The possibility of deliberately changing our beliefs is, of course, the subject of a complex discussion that we leave to one side here. See, however, L. H. Athens, "Dramatic Self-Change", *The Sociological Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1995).

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to happen. The stark reality of such experiences gives us grounds to suspect that a person can be wrong about what she take to be her own central moral characteristics. This implies that a self-concept may not always accurately reflect an actual self in certain key respects. A person may not turn out to be who she thinks she is. At the extreme, one could imagine a person constructing and maintaining a self-concept that, although consistent, was false in all key respects.[14] If it is possible to have delusional ideas about one's self, then self and self-concept can indeed come apart. Since we are dealing with two things here and not one, genuine self-transformation must require more than merely changing what one thinks about one's self.

If, as has been briefly argued, self and self-concept are distinct, legitimate questions arise about their causal relationship. Some have proposed that the self creates the self-concept (who else, after all, could do this?). As Kristjánsson points out, however, the view that the self creates the self-concept becomes problematic if it is taken to imply that the actual self is solely responsible for generating the self-concept with no influence going in the other direction.[15] It does, after all, seem implausible to claim that a person's self-concept has no impact whatsoever on his or her actual self. If, for example, a person spends thirty years or so cultivating and maintaining a self-concept according to which she is frightened to leave the house, then it seems likely that she will become genuinely frightened to leave the house. This fear will, through force of habit, have become one of her core characteristics. She will aspire never to leave the house and her ideal life will be one in which she never has to. This example suggests that the ideas we have about ourselves are to be granted some power with respect to who we actually are. This suggestion is consistent with the findings of much recent cognitive psychology, especially, but not exclusively, the evolving positive psychology movement.

David Jopling argues that the traffic between self and self-concept goes both ways.[16] What a person thinks about himself can, in some circumstances, affect his actual self, but his actual self can also affect his self-concept.[17] That someone thinks of himself as a practising Roman Catholic, for example, might well affect his actual core commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals—the total set of which constitutes his self. For one thing, thinking of himself as a Roman Catholic will presumably make it more likely that he will continue to act like one and continue to hold appropriate commitments and so on. But the fact that he *is* a practising Roman Catholic most likely plays a causal role in his holding and maintaining the belief that he is (that is, he has this belief as a constitutive part of his self-concept because of certain facts about his actual self). We would expect his self-concept to track his actual core commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals. If it did not, we might begin to suspect a worrying lack of correspondence between his actual self and his self-concept, a lack which could be aptly described as a drastic failure of self-knowledge.

There would be something very odd, as was mentioned previously, about a person whose self-concept was wholly at odds with his or her actual behaviour and the commitments, aspirations and ideals which that behaviour implied. Nonetheless, it is probably unexceptional for people to exhibit an inexact correspondence between their actual self and their self-concept. We can safely presume, then, at least for the purposes of the following discussion, that there is a significant distinction between self and self-concept, and that patterns of mutual influence can be inferred. The self, as the set of a person's actual core commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals, is the cognitive object of a person's self-concept; and that self-concept is capable of providing the person with a more or less accurate representation of their actual self.

The distinction between self and self-concept is highly relevant to the project of self-transformation, for in striving to transform ourselves, morally or religiously, we are doing more than attempting to change our ideas about ourselves. We are trying to bring about a real change to ourselves at the level of core commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals. Although our efforts to transform ourselves inescapably

14 On this, see D. Moshman, "False Moral Identity: Self-Serving Denial in the Maintenance of Moral Self-Conceptions", in *Moral Development, Self, and Identity*, ed. D. K. Lapsley and D. Narvaez (Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004).

15 Kristjánsson, *The Self and Its Emotions*, 29.

16 Jopling, *Self-Knowledge and the Self.*

17 Ibid., 65.

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involve our self-concepts, anyone seeking such a profound self-transformation as that which religions offer would rightly be perplexed to be informed that there was nothing at stake other than how he or she *thought* of him or herself. Indeed, merely thinking of oneself as, for instance, Christ-like, or enlightened, while not actually being so would be to engage in serious self-deception, and it would also be likely to get one into a great deal of trouble. The self which transforms must be something that includes but goes beyond the self-concept.

VI. OBSTACLES ON THE JOURNEY

Having established that we have some notion of a self which could be the subject of transformation, that self-transformation is possible, and that commitment to goals characterizable as broadly religious involves commitment to the project of self-transformation, we find ourselves, like Dante, in the middle of matters. It would be useful, then, to look at some of the obstacles facing a religious self as she undertakes the project of self-transformation.

It is difficult to see one's self well. The difficulty is akin to the familiar problem of the eye that tries to see itself. To see itself the eye requires a reflective surface, but that surface can produce a distorted image. Just so, a self-concept can easily give a distorted representation of an actual self. Discernment of good and evil (in the sense that was explained in section I) can thus be difficult at the best of times. Without an accurate assessment of where we are on the path, and in spite of the clear injunction to engage in self-transformation, it is hard to know how to proceed. To make matters worse, a person might doubt whether or not he or she can, in fact, accomplish what is required.

If, as has been suggested, the self-concept of a religious self includes the belief that the current self is not yet what it could or should be, we can infer that the content of a person's self-concept need not be limited to beliefs about the current condition of that person's self. A self-concept can also include beliefs about what the self in question might become. The content of this future projection will be in part a product of the person's actual social environment and, in particular, of his or her religious tradition and spiritual experience.

Religious traditions provide rich fodder to fill the trough of the imagination as it works to fill out conceptions of possible future selves.[18] The major religions of both Asia and the West contain a plethora of distinctive and more or less elaborate religious anthropologies (these usually include accounts of human origins, the current human condition, and our final destiny). Such religious anthropologies tend to be highly conceptualized elaborations of whatever a religion presents as the goal its adherents are to strive towards. As remarked earlier, religious traditions also provide guidance about the sorts of things that an individual might do (for instance, prayer, fasting and alms-giving) more effectively to bridge the gap between their current self and whatever their ideal future self is taken to be. The ideal future self is the self that has reached the goal or, at least, has taken substantial strides towards reaching it. Given this, we would expect a religious person's self-concept to include general beliefs about what he or she needs to do in order to advance towards the goal inherent in his or her religious commitment.

Once an aspiring religious self has accepted the goal presented by her religious tradition and has, therefore, as a core commitment of her actual self, the desire to reach this goal, as well as the conviction that the goal is actually achievable, how should she proceed? To make the discussion more concrete, let us focus on the goal set by Christianity. How might someone set about becoming Christ-like? We can discard the idea that the religious self seeks to *become* Christ in either a quantitative or a full qualitative sense.[19] Rather, a person might desire that *he himself*, or *she herself*, becomes Christ-like; not that he or she becomes Christ.

18 See Victoria S. Harrison, "Imagination and the Lives of Others", in *Imagination*: *Cross-Cultural Philosophical Analyses*, ed. H.-G. Moeller and A. Whitehead. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

19 Christians typically neither desire to become numerically one with Christ nor to share full qualitative identity with him. For the latter condition to obtain would require that all the properties of Christ (including the historically determined ones) were shared by the Christian. But Christians do not generally aspire, for example, to have been born in Bethlehem and brought up in Nazareth, or to have been crucified in Jerusalem at the beginning of the Common Era.

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But here arises an initial problem. The Christian tradition supplies general knowledge about how to achieve the goal, but the aspirant wants to know what it would take for him or her, as an individual embodied in a specific life context, to become Christ-like (and thus what transformation is required of him or her to reach that goal). An answer appropriate to this inquiring individual will be different from the answer that might be given to the question of what it would take for you, or for anyone else, to become Christ-like. This is not merely because people are embedded in different cultural and social contexts, or because they have different levels of education, it is also—and more importantly—because their goals are different tokens of the same type. Just as when one person becomes Christ-like she remains herself and does not become Christ, she does not become anyone else either. Although each person can become Christ-like, they do not thereby become identical, numerically or fully qualitatively, to others who are also Christ-like.

Even sharing the same goal with others, then, any individual Christian—insofar as he or she has not yet attained that goal—may well be rather unclear about what it would mean for him or her to become Christ-like. This gives rise to the further problem that any individual Christian might not have a very clear idea about what changes are necessary for him or her personally to reach that goal. Any individual in an imperfect state is unlikely to be in a position to know what their perfected self will be like. We can, nonetheless, presume that the distance between the actual self and the ideal future self that has reached the goal will be part of a Christian's self-concept, for this distance is a key feature of Christian teaching. How, then, can any individual form an accurate enough conception of his or her ideal future self to allow him or her to progress consciously towards embodying that conception?

The nub of the problem is that the ideal self—the self that a person desires to be and is committed to becoming—does not yet exist and is therefore not directly accessible to self-knowledge. Left to his own resources, and until he has undergone the required self-transformation, a person might simply not know what it would mean for him to become Christ-like and to have closed the gap between his actual self and his ideal self. How then can he gain access to the idea of his ideal self so that he can incorporate that idea within his self-concept and thereby allow it to play a role in transforming his actual current self into closer conformity with the ideal? In the next section, while not denying that other resources are available, we turn our attention to the use of spiritual exemplars as a, frequently under-appreciated, means to overcome the obstacles to self-transformation we have discussed.[20]

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VII. EXEMPLARS AS COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

The exemplars that are of interest here are people who, on their life's journey, have been able to discern between good and evil and have managed to successfully embody the good in some general or specific way. These exemplars can be divided into two main types: some are comprehensive exemplars, and some are partial exemplars. As we shall see, comprehensive exemplars are rare, thus most exemplars belong to the second type. The rarity of individuals belonging to the first type results from the exacting nature of the requirement for inclusion. To be classed as a comprehensive exemplar every aspect of a person's life would have to be regarded as exemplary. In the way they live, or have lived, the exemplar would have to embody (or, at least, be thought to embody) a full expression of whatever the ideal life is taken to be. A Christian, for instance, might regard Jesus of Nazareth as a comprehensive exemplar in this sense, while a Muslim would be likely to identify Muhammad as occupying this role. A Buddhist would probably regard the Buddha as a comprehensive exemplar, and so on. However, the relative rarity of comprehensive exemplars—and the distance between their lives and the lives of the majority of people (even the majority of people who are religious)—suggests that we should look to partial rather than to comprehensive exemplars in our search for figures that might play a key role in the formation of mature religious selves.

20 Ian James Kidd has investigated the notion of spiritual exemplarity and its use within the spiritual life. Kidd has also explored how people can access the lives of spiritual exemplars through narrative. See Ian J. Kidd, "Spiritual Exemplars", *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79, no. 4 (2018).

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Partial exemplars are individuals who are exemplary in some particular respect, or respects, but not in all possible respects. For whatever reason, the whole of such a person's life is not judged to be exemplary. Abraham, for instance, might be regarded as exemplary by Jews, Christians and Muslims because he exhibited faith to an exceptionally high degree. He is, then, regarded as an exemplar of faithfulness. But, despite his faith and other valued properties, Abraham had his flaws and so is not usually regarded as a total exemplar by adherents of any of these faiths.[21] Many individuals who are regarded as saints in the Christian tradition are, like Abraham, partial exemplars. They have come to our attention because they exemplify the practice of some particular virtue that is highly regarded within Christianity, such as faith, hope, or charity. They might also be regarded as partial exemplars because of their exceptional performance of a type of activity or role.[22] We might, for instance, identify someone as an exemplar of good leadership or of good motherhood, or even as an exemplary Christian teacher. Like exemplars of particular virtues, role-exemplars may be flawed in respects that do not directly affect their exemplary performance of their role.

Fortunately, partial exemplars are widely accessible. They may be historical figures who are known to us indirectly through tradition and scripture, such as the Apostle James; or they could be current figures who are known to us through media like newspapers and movies. Some partial exemplars may, on the other hand, be directly known to us. A grandparent or a colleague, for instance, might be regarded as exemplary of some virtue or some role. Moreover, there doesn't seem to be any reason why a fictional character could not be a partial exemplar. Someone might, for instance, take Gandalf from *The Lord of the Rings* as a partial exemplar of the religiously charged virtue of hope.

The role played by such exemplars in moral development is the focus of steadily increasing attention among moral philosophers, moral psychologists and those interested, more generally, in moral education. There is much evidence to suggest that it comes naturally to us to identify exemplars; it is something that most people seem to do readily and spontaneously. Moral exemplarists, such as Linda Zagzebski[23] and Raimond Gaita,[24] claim that we first encounter moral values not by reflecting on abstract moral principles but by being exposed to people whose lives are shaped by moral considerations. We learn the meaning of moral values through seeing them at work in the lives of people we know, or perhaps by hearing about such people in stories. Observation of exemplary moral individuals can guide us towards crafting good lives for ourselves; lives that also display the moral values we came to know through encountering our exemplars. In order to want to live moral lives ourselves, we need to see examples of people living such lives, and to be sufficiently attracted by what we see. It is the attractiveness of the lives of these people that makes us want to be like them by living virtuous lives ourselves. According to exemplarism, our grasp of moral theory typically comes—if it comes at all—after we have been sensitized to moral values by exposure to moral exemplars. An encounter with a moral exemplar is thought to be effective because it can stimulate our moral imagination with respect to the possibilities of a life shaped by moral considerations. Reflecting on the exemplar allows us to enter imaginatively into what it would be like for *us* to live such a life.[25]

Given the pivotal role exemplars often play in the development of the moral self, it is easy to see the parallel role that exemplars might play in the self-transformation that takes place as a person matures within the framework of meaning provided by a religion. Within a religious community, moreover, we would expect to find exemplary individuals who have arrived at their own approximations to the community's ideal. A Christian community, for instance, would probably include mature individuals who are closer to their ideal self (their own expression of the religious goal of being Christ-like) than are others. In addition to people who might be encountered within a religious community, most religions also help their adherents by

21 For an extended and insightful meditation on Abraham's character, see Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Clarendon Press, 2010), 258–307.

22 See Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 56.

23 See Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory*; Linda T. Zagzebski, "The Admirable Life and the Desirable Life", in *Values and Virtues*, ed. Timothy Chappell (Oxford Univ. Press, 2006); Linda T. Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Virtue Theory", *Metaphilosophy* 41 (2010).

24 See Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (Routledge, 2000).

25 Harrison, "Imagination and the Lives of Others".

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deliberately identifying as exemplars some of those who have successfully bridged the gap (at least, to a large extent) between their actual self and their ideal self. These exemplary people are often known as "saints", and they provide hope and inspiration to those of us who are still on the way. Within Christianity, the saints are presented to the faithful as individuals who can serve as models, because they have lived exemplary Christian lives and have become Christ-like themselves.[26]

In the religious case, as in the moral case, exemplars can help a person to bridge the gap between the actual self as it is in the present and the ideal self as it might be projected into the future. Given the ready accessibility of exemplars, a Christian might well have within her self-concept an aspiration to use a particular saint as an exemplar, and this may be instrumental in bringing about a transformation of her current self so that it comes into closer approximation to her ideal self. A self-concept can come to embrace more possibilities through imaginative engagement with exemplars than it would have been able to if it merely had the resources of an actual current self (and, perhaps, the current selves of those in its immediate vicinity) to draw upon. The attractiveness of the lives of exemplary figures might also provide a person with the motivation to structure his or her own life so as to express the commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals in question.

By helping an individual to acquire a more exact understanding of what the religious commitment that has been undertaken demands of him or her, reflection upon exemplary people can provide cognitive access to a conception of an ideal future self that is adequate to act upon. Reflecting on an exemplar's life can also provide important clues about what sort of practices might be required in order to draw closer oneself to the religious goal, and hence to bring one's actual self into closer conformity with the ideal. Stories about exemplars can also provide a mirror to help the aspirant to discern his or her current state of self, the proportion of light and dark, so that a more accurate assessment of the needs of the journey to maturity can be made.[27]

Genuine exemplars constitute a vivid expression of the commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals that are characteristic of someone who is making substantial progress towards the religious goal. They can also show what it looks like when the task of self-transformation is accomplished in an actual embodied way, thereby providing a basis for believing that success is achievable. Exemplary figures, then, can allow imaginative access both to possible future selves and to intimations of the path to be taken to reach them. Reflection upon carefully chosen exemplars is clearly a powerful tool for those seeking to move from their present state to one closer to their ideal.[28]

VIII. AUTHENTICITY

An important concern might be raised regarding the use of exemplars as models for self-transformation. If a person were to use another's commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals to flesh out a conception of his or her own future self, would that person not thereby risk undermining his or her own individuality by then seeking to cultivate those characteristics in himself or herself.[29] By deliberately engaging in a process of self-transformation, using another individual as a model, does a person not betray their own unique potential? Perhaps such a person threatens their own authenticity by employing exemplars in this way. Even without bringing exemplars into the picture, particularly serious problems would arise if it were to turn out that being authentic, or "true to oneself," requires faithfulness to one's actual current self rather than to a currently non-existent ideal future self. Deliberately seeking to transform one's current

26 For an extended discussion of these ideas in relation to the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, see Victoria S. Harrison, *The Apologetic Value of Human Holiness: Von Balthasar's Christocentric Philosophical Anthropology* (Kluwer, 2000).

27 With his concept of narrative identity, Paul Ricœur has underlined the importance of the reflective possibilities of stories for the development of self-expression. See Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Seuil, 1990).

28 See Harrison, "Imagination and the Lives of Others". Also, see Mario J. Valdes, ed., *A Ricœur Reader: Reflection and Imagination* (Univ. of Toronto Press, 1991).

29 For a discussion of this issue, see Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*.

self into another self could be uncharitably portrayed as a form of self-directed treachery. If successful, would the transformation not, after all, amount to the death of the current self?

By stressing the goal of self-transformation, and recommending the exemplar-based method for reaching it, are religions not surreptitiously undermining the individuality of their adherents? Is there a real danger of, what we might call, "spiritual cloning" among the faithful of any particular tradition? Such questions are important given the prominent place religions give to the goal of self-transformation, along with their emphasis on the examples provided by those who have successfully reached the goal, or at least advanced substantially towards it. In fact, however, it seems highly unlikely that any individual could succeed in becoming an exact replica of someone else, nor does it seem likely that anyone could successfully replicate the trajectory of another's spiritual journey. It seems more likely that a person seeking to move closer to her religious goal would use selectively what can be learnt from exemplars, while making judgments about how best to use this to deepen her understanding of her own commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals. In the light of what she has learnt, she will also modify her understanding of what she needs to do as she heads towards her goal.

Besides, as a learning method, imitation is not problematic in and of itself. Humans use imitation to learn how to do a wide variety of things, such as learning to speak and learning to be skilful at sports. Conceptual instruction is rarely sufficient for non-mathematical human learning and most people benefit from embodied examples as well. Even in very abstract disciplines people use exemplars (watching how their mentors act, for example) to orient their own practices. Innovators usually study and imitate what has gone before, and then they use what they have learnt as a base to create new ways of doing things. Picasso and Van Gogh both produced paintings of the sort usual in their day before creating the styles for which they are now famous, for instance.

It also seems likely that a religious person would take insight and inspiration from a number of different spiritual exemplars throughout the course of her life. Looking retrospectively at her own life, one of the present authors can see the influence of different figures waxing and waning over time. Thomas Merton and Thérèse de Lisieux were both especially important to her when she was in her twenties.[30] There is no doubt that she took a great deal of inspiration from both of them as she tried to decipher what it meant for her to live a Christian life and what would be required of her if she were to move further towards being her ideal self. Reflecting on these exemplars allowed her to deepen her own understanding of what it would be like for her to reach her goal, in addition to helping her to refine her understanding of what that goal was. As she grew older, however, these particular exemplars came to occupy a much less prominent place in her inner life. To her surprise, she came to feel that she had outgrown both of them (by which she does not mean that she took herself to have out-paced them in her approximation to the religious goal!). The analysis developed in this paper suggests that she had assimilated into her own self-understanding what she had learnt from these exemplars and deployed it to form, as well as she could, the self she was becoming as she transitioned from a young adult into the next phase of her life—a phase that was, in fact, to benefit from reflective consideration of a different set of exemplars.

Michel de Montaigne was alert to the educational value of the process whereby the insights of others are assimilated and made one's own as one develops core features of oneself. He was especially concerned with how people develop their own judgment, or skill of discrimination, by "plundering" what can be learnt and "borrowed" from others:

> The bees plunder the flowers here and there, but afterward they make of them honey, which is all theirs; it is no longer thyme or marjoram. Even so with the pieces borrowed from others; he will transform and blend them to make a work that is all his own, to wit, his judgment.[31]

30 See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (SPCK, 2009) and Thérèse Martin, *Historie d'une âme: manuscrits autobiographiques* (Cerf, 1990).

31 Michel de Montaigne, "Of the Education of Children", in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford Univ. Press, 1958), 111.

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A religious person, then, seeks to become more fully herself by reflecting upon exemplars and by employing whatever other practices are recommend by her tradition. She wants to close the gap between her actual self and her ideal self, and she uses various examples of people who have already done this—at least, to some degree—to provide her with insight into what she might become if she succeeds. She takes what she learns from exemplars and uses it to shape a life that is uniquely her own. If she is a Christian, she will—if all goes well—arrive at her own way of being Christ-like. Once she has reached this point her actual self, her ideal self and her self-concept will be aligned: the resultant individual will be, as de Montaigne puts it, "all her own."[32] In allowing religious concerns to represent a fulfilment of something central to herself, she has chosen to "be true to" the self which she will become by taking those concerns seriously.[33]

IX. CONCLUSION

In the context of the broader aim of shedding light on the spiritual journey, this paper has focused on the notion self-transformation and on the use of exemplars to facilitate self-transformation. However, as almost every human life has the potential for deliberate self-transformation, the analysis offered here is also relevant outside the religious domain. Religious traditions are well suited for giving a focus to self-transformative efforts, but there are other pathways as well. The problems inherent in the journey of self-transformation, and the difficulties of discerning the way forward on the path, will be common to all such endeavours. Hence, the use of exemplars is relevant not just to the religiously inclined, but to anyone aspiring to become a better self than they currently are.

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32 Ibid.

33 The treatment of several of the themes developed in this paper, especially the theme of "being true to oneself", is indebted to two departed friends, Catharina Stenqvist and Thord Svensson.

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